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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 04 PRETORIA 004105

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TAGS: PGOV PINR PHUM KDEM SF

SUBJECT: ANC SUCCESSION: ZUMA HAS EDGE, BUT IT'S NOT OVER YET

REF: A. 06 PRETORIA 2780

- 1B. PRETORIA 3939
- 1C. PRETORIA 3764
- 1D. PRETORIA 3948
- 1E. PRETORIA 4088

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Classified By: Chief of Mission Eric M. Bost. Reasons 1.4(b) and (d).

SUMMARY

11. (C) With only two weeks to go before the ANC elects its next President the field has narrowed to a tight race between ANC President Thabo Mbeki and Deputy President Jacob Zuma, with Tokyo Sexwale and Cyril Ramaphosa trailing far behind. Some still hold out hope that the animosity generated between the Mbeki and Zuma camps could be cooled by a compromise candidate, perhaps with some intervention by former President Nelson Mandela, but this appears increasingly unlikely. Mbeki's stated wish that the next national president be a woman has not resulted in strong female contenders for the top ANC slot.

12. (C) Prior to the submission of formal nominations by the Provincial General Councils and the ANC women's and youth leagues, many observers thought the advantages of incumbency would give Mbeki a major edge. Zuma's surprisingly strong showing in the nominations process has given him a numerical edge and a new burst of momentum, with the Mbeki organization engaged in a nation-wide game of catch-up.

13. (C) While current vote estimates show Zuma in the lead, they are not necessarily predictive. Voting delegates to the Polokwane national conference will not be bound by their branch or provincial positions. The race is becoming increasingly personalized, as the Zuma and Mbeki camps battle for the votes of the 4,075 individuals who have been chosen to cast secret ballots in Polokwane. Any major political development between now and December 16 has the potential to affect the outcome. While speculation about the likely victor is rampant, polls have little relevance and reliable fact-based predictions are difficult, since no one can know for certain what lies in the hearts and minds of the voting delegates. END SUMMARY.

Zuma vs. Mbeki

¶4. (C) As the December 16-20 ANC National Congress in Polokwane approaches, the field of ANC presidential candidates has narrowed considerably from the initial contenders outlined in Ref A, but no one has sewn it up yet. Nominations from the ANC provincial structures, the ANC Youth League, and the ANC Women's League were submitted by the November 26 party deadline. Most analysts and diplomats expected that ANC President and South African national President Thabo Mbeki would emerge from these formal nominations processes slightly in the lead, given his past history of savvy and sophisticated manipulation of party organizational structures and the obvious advantages of incumbency. ANC Deputy President Jacob Zuma's surprisingly strong showing at the Provincial General Councils and his unexpected endorsement by the Women's League (Ref E) have given him a numerical edge and a significant boost in momentum as the race enters its final weeks. (NOTE: We have heard reports that as many as 10 Mbeki supporters failed to show up for the Women's League decision process.)

¶5. (C) Mbeki's biggest weakness appears to be the pervasive undercurrent of discontent with his leadership style, which is increasingly described as "undemocratic" and Ois increasingly described as "undemocratic" and "authoritarian". Mbeki is not seen as a reconciler like Mandela was and there is concern about how he would treat those in the Zuma camp if he wins -- serious considerations given the party's emphasis on unity. However, press speculation that a Zuma win would be followed by efforts to force early parliamentary elections aimed at unseating Mbeki as national president has caused similar concerns about the potential divisiveness of a Zuma presidency. As the incumbent, Mbeki can still promise more in the lead-up to the

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election than anyone else. He also has a track record of effectively using party structures to get what he wants. Recent allegations of vote-buying (Ref B) and rumors that those previously shut out of inner party circles (eg former Parliamentary Speaker Frene Ginwala and former Limpopo Premier Ngoako Ramatlhodi) have been invited back into the tent indicate that Mbeki's supporters is pulling out all the stops. Business Day political editor Karima Brown, who does not like Mbeki, told PolOff (prior to the release of nomination results) that "anyone who discounts him is a fool." ANC Researcher Wande Makalima, who does not support either Mbeki or Zuma, also warned PolOff that Mbeki has a way of mysteriously winning elections, citing the recent elections of Stone Sizani and Paul Mashabane as ANC Chairpersons of Eastern Cape and Gauteng respectively. "No one, and I mean no one, saw either one of those outcomes coming," he said. On the other hand, it was Zuma who topped the nomination list of the Gauteng Provincial General Council this past weekend.

¶6. (C) There was never any question that Zuma has the most grassroots support within the ANC. The formal nominations process demonstrated that he has stronger support within the party structures than anticipated. However, it remains unclear how much support Zuma has among the ANC leadership, many of whom consider him a "disaster." The specter of pending corruption charges also hangs over Zuma's head. Analysts and observers long have argued that Zuma's camp lacks the intellectual and financial resources to outmaneuver Mbeki. These next two weeks will be the test of the Zuma and Mbeki organizations, as each competes to win the votes of a majority of the 4,075 individuals selected as delegates to the Polokwane national conference. Voting delegates have been carefully selected by regional and provincial officials, but they are free to vote their conscience and will have personal aspirations at stake in addition to their branch

loyalties and responsibilities.

The Battle Takes Shape

17. (C) Reports out of KwaZulu-Natal illustrate the intense and increasingly personalized struggle that is developing as the Mbeki camp engages in a nation-wide uphill battle to retain current supporters and win the loyalties of additional voting delegates. According to a local ANC insider, KZN Premier Ndebele (ANC Provincial Chairperson and an Mbeki supporter) sent an SMS to provincial Mbeki loyalists on 25 November rallying the troops and urging them to focus on the delegates and to chip away at Zuma's party credentials.

18. (C) At a 28 November meeting of key provincial leaders in the Mbeki camp, Ndebele laid out the national strategy and KZN's role in it. Attendees -- who represented 9 of the 11 ANC regions in the province and included the ANC's Deputy Provincial Secretary, at least two members of the provincial Executive Council (MECs) and several members of the provincial legislature (MPLs) -- were told that the national focus is to chip away at Zuma's gains and to secure the votes needed to win in Limpopo. The national Mbeki team believes he is still in the race and are confident they will catch up.

The Mbeki camp believes that media estimates of the vote count are incorrect. Press reports show Zuma up by more than 800 votes, but after examining the votes of the individuals who are actually going to be delegates at Polokwane, the Mbeki camp assesses the gap to be 430 votes.

19. (C) Each province was instructed to assess Mbeki's strength locally and was given a target number of voting delegates that they must deliver in order for Mbeki to close the gap. KZN must produce a total of 120 votes, or an additional 42 branch and provincial delegates beyond the current 78 that local authorities believe are already firmly pro-Mbeki. Over the course of the meeting, each region within the province was assessed in terms of delegates who are confirmed Mbeki supporters, those that are "winnable", and those that are unshakably pro-Zuma. Mbeki supporters will spend the coming days working in the regions to shore up support and influence, directly or indirectly, those delegates deemed "winnable." They will regroup next week, at

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which time each is expected to have won the support of 10 new voting delegates. Meeting attendees were told that the Mbeki camp will pay the fees (R850) for any delegate wishing to attend Polokwane who is unable to cover the expenses personally. Allegedly, Zuma supporters in Durban and Pietermaritzburg are already paying for pro-Zuma delegates, but not for those thought/known to support Mbeki.

110. (C) At the same time, the ANC Provincial Secretary, Senzo Mchunu (a strong Zuma supporter), is working hard to make sure that the delegates who go to Polokwane are pro-Zuma. In media interviews, he has said his people will stay with delegates right up until the conference. Money reportedly is flowing in all directions. The eThekweni region (Durban) which strongly supports Zuma, is reportedly pressuring its delegates hard to stay in line, with rumors of phone tapping and people being followed. These rumors help reconcile the meager nine votes Mbeki received at the KZN Provincial General Council with their goal of bringing 120 voting delegates to Polokwane. The understanding is that in order to keep their delegates from being replaced or pressured, the Mbeki camp told their voters to keep their heads down.

Longshots

¶11. (C) Most have discounted Cyril Ramaphosa's chances of succeeding Mbeki as ANC President, despite his unmatched respect from both grassroots and ANC leaders and widespread agreement that he would make a solid ANC President. Three different explanations are commonly cited in explaining Ramaphosa's lack of momentum: (1) he naively played by the rules by not campaigning while others campaigned extensively; (2) he has been actively thwarted by Mbeki who does not trust or like him; and, (3) he does not have strong presidential aspirations. The truth probably lies in a combination of all three (NOTE: or perhaps he really means it when he says he doesn't want the job and isn't running). Ramaphosa diligently obeyed the ANC's mantra that the party picks its leader, not the other way around, but has been left in Mbeki's, Zuma's, and Tokyo Sexwale's dust in the meantime. Political analyst William Gumede told Poloff that Ramaphosa also has been turned off by all of the backbiting leading up to the election. His only hope is if concrete support builds for a consensus candidate, to be nominated from the floor in Polokwane.

¶12. (C) ANC Secretary General Kgalema Motlanthe has never declared himself a candidate and has not actively campaigned, but nevertheless remains a potential compromise candidate. According to Business Day political editor Karima Brown, former President Mandela asked him to run as party President. However, Motlanthe -- the poster child for ANC discipline and tradition -- refused to run against a sitting President. Motlanthe is already well respected in the party and probably scored even more points by refusing to run against Mbeki. Zuma's supporters often mention that Motlanthe is a back-up to Zuma, potentially giving Motlanthe support from Zuma's camp in the unlikely event that Zuma were to step down from the race. Motlanthe also would appeal to many who seek a consensus candidate. However, attempts over the past year by elders and other ANC leaders to find a "third way" have not Qelders and other ANC leaders to find a "third way" have not gotten off the ground.

¶13. (C) By all accounts, businessman Tokyo Sexwale's colossal financial success, candidness, and charisma have all but squashed any chance of his securing the ANC presidency. His attempts to "break the mold" by openly campaigning, talking about South Africa's issues, and questioning the opaque nature of ANC politics have elicited strong support among elites. However, they have hurt his chances among ANC members who describe his ambition and love of the limelight, along with his wealth and ostentatious lifestyle, as distasteful and unbecoming an ANC leader. As one ANC member put it to PolOff, "how can someone who just bought a house for R56 million (approximately 8 million USD) truly have the interest of the average ANC member at heart?" Sexwale has publicly denied recent press reports claiming he had joined the Zuma camp, and is carefully avoiding statements of support for either Mbeki or Zuma.

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¶14. (C) Despite Mbeki's public statements that he wants a woman to succeed him as state president, no prominent female -- not even Foreign Minister Nkosazana Dlamini-Zuma or national Deputy President Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka -- has been considered a serious contender for the top ANC job. Mbeki has made tremendous strides in dragging the ANC toward gender parity, but the ANC as an organization continues to have strong patriarchal elements. While there is strong support for Dlamini-Zuma in other party leadership roles, her only chance at succeeding Mbeki as party president is if both Mbeki and Zuma (her ex-husband) agree to step down and then specifically agree to her as a compromise candidate.

COMMENT

¶15. (C) Now that the campaign has narrowed to winning the personal support of the 4,075 individuals who have been designated as voting delegates, it is nearly impossible to predict who the winner will be despite Zuma's new momentum and numerical edge. This unprecedented uncertainty is inspiring rampant speculation, not only about the outcome of the election itself, but about a vast array of potential follow-on actions that might be taken by both Mbeki and Zuma depending on who wins and how. If the Zuma and Mbeki camps remain irreconcilable, there is still an outside chance that momentum for a third consensus candidate could build, bringing all the longshot candidates back into play.

¶16. (C) The race is tight enough that either Mbeki or Zuma has the potential to win a majority of the delegates, using any and all methods at their disposal. Because each delegate ultimately will vote his/her own conscience, polling results have little meaning at this stage and reliable vote counts are only possible if one knows the hearts and minds of each individual delegate. Some delegates may not truly make up their minds until they are on the floor in Polokwane. Some may have pledged their loyalty to one candidate, but could still change their minds in the heat of the conference. In this context, any politically significant event (e.g. a last-minute reindictment of Zuma on corruption charges) could affect the election outcome. Tokyo Sexwale's public fence-sitting is indicative of the race's closeness. Given Sexwale's access to inside information and the personal business interests and political aspirations he has at stake, if he was confident about the likely winner he would throw his support to that camp in anticipation of the rewards such loyalty would bring.

¶17. (C) Most analysts suspect that former president Nelson Mandela is unlikely to weigh in. Rumors of Mandela's poor health have been circulating for the past year and he has significantly scaled back public appearances. Thus far, he has studiously avoided voicing an ANC succession preference, recently pulling back an SABC advertisement where he appears next to Mbeki in fear this would be interpreted as an endorsement. However, Mandela's opinion would carry great weight -- even if he called for unity behind a compromise candidate.

¶18. (C) Much of the succession debate rhetoric has focused on ANC "tradition," when this race is anything but traditional. The fact that party leadership positions are even being challenged is new and uncertain territory for the Qeven being challenged is new and uncertain territory for the ANC. It is a party in transformation, with divisions emerging between generations, philosophical perspectives, and struggle experiences (e.g. those who went into exile and those who remained behind). But there is no indication at present that these divisions will irreparably fracture the ANC.

¶19. (U) This message was drafted in cooperation with ConGen Durban.

BOST